

*THE*

# *HISTORIAN*

*OF HANCOCK COUNTY*

www.hancockcountyhistoricalsociety.com

Bay Saint Louis, Mississippi

September 2021

## NEWS FROM LOBRANO HOUSE

The Kate Lobrano House is open Monday through Friday 10:00 a.m. until noon and 1:00 p.m. until 3:00 p.m., closing from 12:00–1:00 for lunch. Unless there is a state, county, or city requirement mandated, masks are not required but are suggested for visitors.

Monthly luncheons have been postponed until further notice, but we look forward to their return as soon as we feel we can do so without affecting the health of our members.



The light cruiser *USS San Diego* earned eighteen battle stars during the Pacific Campaign of World War II.

The Hancock County Historical Society  
respectfully requests you

**SAVE THE DATE!!!**

**TUESDAY EVENING, DECEMBER 7th**

IT WILL BE EPIC!

IT WILL BE MEMORABLE!

**IT WILL BE FUN!**

**You don't want to miss it!**

.....Details coming soon.....

## **WORLD WAR II: THE PACIFIC CAMPAIGN**

By  
James Keating, M.D.

Ed.  
Virginia Olander

The Pacific Theater of World War II (WWII) started on December 7, 1941, when the Empire of Japan attacked Pearl Harbor. This theater witnessed some of the largest naval battles in military history that included Coral Sea, Midway, Guadalcanal, Leyte

Gulf, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa. An Instrument of Surrender was signed on the battleship *USS Missouri* September 2, 1945. Casualties of WWII included 161,000 American dead. Japan suffered 2,121,000 army and navy deaths and 800,000 civilian deaths.

Back home in Hancock County during WWII, a spirit of patriotism prevailed. Each citizen felt an obligation to do his part for the war effort. A local draft board inducted the young men into the armed services. Many women volunteered for the various non-combat support services. One such example was Emily de Montluzin who was recruit-

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**LOBRANO HOUSE  
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MONDAY — FRIDAY  
10:00AM — 3:00PM  
Closed: 12:00—1:00 (lunch)

**MISSION STATEMENT**

“TO PRESERVE THE GENERAL AND ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY OF HANCOCK COUNTY AND TO PRESERVE THE KATE LOBRANO HOUSE AND COLLECTIONS THEREIN; TO RESEARCH AND INTERPRET LIFE IN HANCOCK COUNTY; AND TO ENCOURAGE AN APPRECIATION OF AND INTEREST IN HISTORICAL PRESERVATION.”

ed by the War Department in 1942 and served in New Orleans and New York City. She was a brilliant censor/code-breaker/cypher. She has been credited with intercepting a coded message containing instructions to local operatives in the Canal Zone to blow up a lock in the Panama Canal, thus preventing the execution of this enemy act of sabotage.

Everyday life in the 1940’s in Hancock County was much simpler and different from today. Families listened to the radio at night to hear the news, listen to President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s “fireside chats,” and hear Kate Smith sing “God Bless America.” Many families read their Bibles at night by kerosene lamp light. Every family had a Victory Garden. Horses, mules, cows, and chickens were commonplace among town folk as well as farmers. A movie ticket at the A & G Theater was seven cents.

There was no shortage of seafood locally. Most houses in the



Emily de Montluzin was a brilliant censor/code-breaker/cypher, who prevented an act of sabotage in the Panama Canal.

county did not have indoor plumbing, and outhouses were commonplace. Many women possessed the skills to make their own attractive clothing. Ames Kergosien reported

**PRESIDENT’S CORNER**

As mentioned previously we have hundreds of original editions of the *Sea Coast Echo* from 1892-1998. Some of the oldest editions have been preserved in the Library of Congress, and this link will give you access to the January 1900 editions.

<https://chroniclingamertic.loc.gov/lccn/sn86074033/issues/1900/>

Georgie Morton and Margaret Sarrat took on the herculean assignment of indexing this collection and Joe and Kathleen Monti are generously providing climate-controlled storage.

To preserve these valuable historical papers, we plan to have them digitized and available on-line to the casual reader, scholars, and historians. The digitizing of this collection is an expensive, laborious, and time consuming process, so we are investigating possible funding sources and third-party providers. We will keep you updated on the progress and availability of these sources.

Perhaps it was after the Battle of Waterloo when Napoleon Bonaparte made this comment “History is a set of lies agreed upon.”

Take care of yourself and others.

Chris Roth  
President

that on the coast there were enforced blackouts at night and air raid protection watch groups. Convoys of military and cargo trucks jammed the highways. Soldiers guarded the bridge over the Bay of St. Louis at night.

The economy of the county was quite vibrant with jobs available for men and women working at installations such as Ingalls Shipyard in Pascagoula, the Higgins Shipbuilding Company at Michoud, LA, Keesler Air Force Base in Biloxi, Gulfport Naval Base, and Brookley Army Air Field in Mobile. Juanita Gex remembers that workers in the Catahoula neighborhood carpooled with other men to distant worksites like Ingalls and stayed there Monday through Friday. Evie Gordon noted that during the war everyone picked up hitchhiker servicemen in uniform on Highway 90 walking from New Orleans to Keesler AFB.

After the attack at Pearl Harbor, citizens of the United States, including Hancock County, enlisted in the armed services. One such Navy WWII veteran, Clyde Cyrial Koerner, is alive and well at age ninety-six. His interesting story, as presented in this article, describes the war experience of one Hancock County Navy seaman who served from 1943-1946 aboard the light cruiser *USS San Diego*.

Clyde Koerner was born on February 18, 1925, and has lived in Bay St. Louis since age two. He attended St. Stanislaus College and enlisted in the Navy in February of 1943. He served the remainder of World War II as a second class gunnery mate on the *USS San Diego*. This ship was an integral part of the Third Fleet Carrier Task Force.

Koerner explained that a typical task force might contain five aircraft carriers surrounded by ten heavy cruisers and on its periphery be scattered ten light cruisers like the *USS San Diego*. The nature of naval warfare in the Pacific Theater of WWII evolved from old fashioned duels of battleships into com-



Second Class Gunnery Mate Clyde Koerner fought in many World II naval battles aboard the *USS San Diego*.

bat between naval powers, principally with airplanes and submarines. The light cruiser was first line of defense capable of thwarting both enemy warplanes and submarines.

The *USS San Diego* was a light cruiser with eight gun turrets on its deck which rotated gun or cannon mounts. This type of ship was armed with anti-aircraft guns with one of the heaviest broadsides in the fleet. Her rapid-fire cannons protected the carriers from aerial attack. This ship was 541 feet in length and 53 feet wide, and it was able to travel thirty-two knots and keep up with any carrier traveling full steam ahead. It had a crew of 750 sailors. This warship boasted eight torpedo tubes and six depth charge projectors which would prove lethal for any intruding enemy submarines.

Within a turret was a gun house that protected the firing mechanism and the gunnery crew where the cannons were located. The shells and gunpowder were transported to the deck by two separate elevators from magazines far below deck in the bottom of the

hull. Koerner was a gunnery mate in charge of such a magazine. He commanded ten sailors during a typical battle that would load the elevators with shell and powder. He was promoted during the war and placed in charge of the armory, a small arms and ordinance storeroom.

One of Koerner's most terrifying experiences occurred in December 1944, when the Third Fleet unwittingly sailed into the heart of a 100mph typhoon. Three destroyers capsized and sank, killing 790 men. Nine other warships were damaged and more than one hundred warplanes were destroyed or washed overboard. The *San Diego* lost its lifeboats but did not sink.

The *USS San Diego* steamed over 300,000 nautical miles during the war and earned eighteen battle stars, more than any other warship except the carrier *Enterprise*. In recognition of its service, Admiral William "Bull" Halsey designated the *USS San Diego*, with Clyde Koerner aboard her, to be the first allied warship to enter Tokyo Bay and take over the naval base there af-



Lieutenant Commander John McDonald served at the Adak Naval Base in the Aleutian Islands in southwest Alaska.



Joseph Clay "J. C." Baxter, Jr., was a Prisoner of War (#382) in Ricon Prison, Niigata, Japan.

ter the surrender of Japan. We are indeed indebted to all of our brave veterans, past and present, like Clyde Koerner who served their country in uniform.

John McDonald (1907-1979) enlisted in the Navy at age thirty-five and served at the Adak Naval Base in the Aleutian Islands in southwest Alaska. Because of his extensive experience in supply chain management, he was commissioned as a Lieutenant Commander of the Supply Corps. The Navy supported the military offensive to invade and occupy the neighboring Japanese Islands of Kiska and Attu. Consequently, the Empire of Japan was prevented from taking over Alaska.

The U.S. Army under General Douglas MacArthur (1880-1964) occupied the various islands in the Pacific in cooperation with the U.S. Navy commanded by Admiral Chester Nimitz. One such soldier from Hancock County was Joseph Clay "J.C." Baxter (1918-2011). Baxter entered the army in early 1941 and was in the Army Air Corp at Nichol's Field outside Manila in the Philippines. After Pearl Harbor, he fought the Japanese and

was taken prisoner having to be part of the Bataan Death March. However, after a few months, he escaped and joined the guerillas fighting in the mountains. Unfortunately he was subsequently recaptured. Later, he was transferred to a prison in Japan to be a slave laborer. Miraculously, he was liberated in 1945 by the US Army. He received the Bronze Star and the Prisoner of War Metal. After the war he owned or managed numerous night clubs and restaurants and nightclubs along the Gulf Coast.

Rationing was necessary on the home front during World War II and was one of the first remembrances of the few old-timers left in Hancock County such as Dot Kersanac. She describes their wartime experience of rationing gasoline/diesel, rubber, and food products such as coffee and sugar. Nancy Gex reported that people organized any chores of shopping so that the mission could be accomplished with one trip to save gas because of rationing.

The number of freight and passenger trains coming through Hancock County increased from a previous level of thirty per day to as many as fifty including trains carrying troops and supplies to and from the numerous military bases along the coast. The trains were pulled by steam-driven engines, and at various spots along the way, next to the railroad tracks, were water tanks and coal shoots. Local citizen, Nellie Kidd, boarded the passenger trains filled with soldiers when they stopped at the depot in Bay St. Louis and sold them her homemade sandwiches. In addition, at certain sites along the tracks such as Bay St. Louis, ashes from the engines were dumped.

In conclusion, everyday life in Hancock County during World War II brought changes such as rationing, blackouts, draft boards, and busy traffic with truck convoys on the highways. Fifty trains a day steamed through the depot section of town. Our citizens, male and female,

volunteered to serve their country. Among them were Emily de Montluzin with her ability to decode messages, John McDonald with his skill and experience of supply chain management, and Navy enlistee, Clyde Koerner, with his development as a gunnery mate which put him in the thick of the action in the Pacific Theater fighting on the light cruiser *USS San Diego*. He survived the many naval battles and lives to this day to tell us the stories of this war. "J.C." Baxter fought the Japanese in the army in the Philippines and survived. He was a POW for three years. A spirit of patriotism prevailed in Hancock County, as well as the rest of the United States, from this "greatest generation" to whom we owe so much. In our next article, the land battles of the European Theater of World War II will be presented.

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**ANNUAL CEMETERY TOUR**

Plans for the Cemetery Tour are still in the works. Because Halloween falls on Sunday this year, the 26th Annual Cemetery Tour will be held on Saturday, October 30, 2021. Needed are volunteers to prepare the cemetery for the tour, to portray citizens buried there, and to act as guides. To volunteer, please call 228-467-4090.

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